

# Creating the Learning Environment

The environment and culture of your program play an important part in social and emotional learning. You can influence the culture of your program by paying attention to the ways that routines, behavior expectations, and conflict resolution processes within your program support social and emotional learning.

This section includes tools and templates to help staff establish group and individual level expectations, give effective feedback, and integrate reflection.

# Skill Building Plan

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Use during a one-on-one conversation with a youth to discuss a specific social and emotional skill. This tool is helpful for youth who are having difficulty meeting behavior expectations. The template can help youth reflect on their social and emotional skill growth, create accountability for their actions, and plan for the future.

## Why This Matters

- One-on-one conversations with youth are crucial for SEL skill development especially after an SEL expectation has been broken.
- Writing down a plan makes it more likely that staff will continue to check in with the youth about their progress.
- Youth-driven accountability creates additional opportunities for SEL skill growth.

## Getting Started

- Program staff should keep track of the Skill Building Plan and follow up with the young person about their progress.

## How To Use It

- 1) Youth and staff fill out the form together. Staff could also ask the youth questions and take notes as they talk.
- 2) Ask some of these conversation starters to have a discussion.
  - How did you feel about completing the form?
  - How can others best support you?
  - What are the benefits of having a plan for the future?
  - How do you feel about the plan?
  - How can you hold yourself accountable to your plan?

## Take It Further

- Program staff can keep track of Skill Building Plans to track behavior over time and to monitor SEL improvement.
- If needed, program staff can involve parents/guardians in the Skill Building Plan.

# Template: Skill Building Plan

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Youth Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Staff Member Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Reflecting on the Situation

What happened?

What was my response? How did others react?

What is the problem? What can I do to fix it?

# Template: Skill Building Plan

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## Planning for the Future

Next time I'm in a similar situation, what could I do differently?

What SEL skills will help me the next time I'm in a similar situation? How will I work on this skill?

What support will I need?

When to check in next:

# Full Value Contract

Use this discussion guide with youth to establish group norms and common expectations. Write the agreement on a piece of paper which youth read, sign, and follow for the duration of the program experience. Depending on the length and location of the program, the contract can be large and posted at the location or small and mobile. This activity was contributed by the Voyageur Outward Bound School.

## Why This Matters

- Setting clear expectations is an important step to create a positive social and emotional learning environment.
- Youth input fosters youth ownership and engenders a greater sense of commitment to the ground rules and shared values.
- Establishing norms and agreements that are grounded in a group's own words and experiences helps create a safe and inclusive environment.

## Getting Started

- Materials: Paper and writing utensils (pens or markers). You may want additional paper for a rough draft during brainstorming.
- Time: 30-60 minutes
- As a facilitator, think in advance about what rules you want to have in the agreement. These might be policies like no cell phones or swear words. Also, know what the group goals are so that the expectations in the agreement support those goals. As you reflect on values and expectations that are important to you as a leader, consider how your own identity, culture, and past experiences are shaping

your values. The required expectations that you bring to the contract should be minimal so that there is ample room for youth to add the values and expectations that are most important to them.

- The content can be general or specific. One group might have "I will keep my electronics put away" while another group may need more explicit guidelines "I will only use my cell phone if I am communicating with a parent or guardian." The group could take a different approach by naming social and emotional skills that are important to the group experience "I will try things I have not done before" or "I will pay attention."
- Pick a discussion location that is comfortable and will be free from distractions.

## How To Do It

- 1) Introduce the contract as a way to be clear about what is expected from everyone. Both youth and facilitators will be committing to the contract.
- 2) Facilitate a conversation using some of the following questions.
  - When have you been part of a group that felt really supportive? (This could be any type of group experience—at home, school, church, camp, in your program, etc.).
  - What did you like about the group? What made it feel supportive for you?
  - What did the people in the group (including the adults) do to make it feel that way?
  - What did you do in the group to make it feel supportive for others?
  - When have you been part of a group that was not supportive?
  - What happened in that experience that you didn't like? What did the people in the group (including the adults) do to make it feel that way? How did your actions contribute to the negative group dynamics?

# Full Value Contract

- 3) Begin taking notes (in a way that is visible to everyone) when you turn the conversation to the current group experience.
  - What is important to you about this group experience? (Identify that answers to this question are a way to talk about values.)
  - What expectations do you have for others? Yourself? Your instructors?
  - If the group is struggling to address values and expectations, name specifically that safety and relationships are going to be group values. Ask,
    - What can we do to ensure safety?
    - What can we do to build relationships?
- 4) Ask youth to identify their top 2-3 expectations for youth, self and staff. Guide the group towards consensus (See **Consensus Building activity** if you want to spend additional time on this process. If the group has trouble reaching consensus, consider how value differences might be influencing the conversation. Questions such as “Why is this important to you?” can be helpful in identifying underlying values.) Explain that we can only control our own actions, not the actions of others. The success of this group is up to each person doing what everyone has agreed is important. Rewrite each expectation in the form of a personal statement like, “I will...” Get input from youth as you talk through revising the priority expectations. Instructors should also explain how they will meet the expectations in the group contract by adding a personal statement, “As an adult, I will...”
- 5) Shift the conversation to accountability.
  - What does accountability mean? Ensure that the group has a common understanding of accountability before moving on.
  - How can we hold each other accountable to the group values and expectations?
  - If your group is mature enough, consider talking about instructor accountability as well.
  - How will the instructors be accountable to the group values and expectations? What is an appropriate way for youth to raise questions or concerns about instructors?
- 6) After youth have verbally agreed to a set of rules for their full value contract, have youth rewrite the contract. Ensure that there is space available for everyone to sign the contract.
- 7) Have youth each read and sign the contract.
- 8) If youth participants are unwilling to sign the contract at the end, don't push it. Talk to youth in a 1:1 setting to better understand their reasons. If satisfactory resolution cannot be reached, consider having a parent meeting to weigh the youth's continued involvement in the program.

## Take It Further

- If it is a multi-session experience, revisit the contract at regular intervals (at least weekly to start). Any of the following questions can be used to reflect on the full value contract, as a group discussion or for an individual journaling activity:
  - How do you feel about the group experience we've been having lately? Is it matching the values we set in our contract?
  - Is the contract working to make this the group experience we said we wanted? Why or why not? How could the contract be more effective?
  - What is an example of a way that you have lived up to the expectations in the contract?
  - We had a great session, what's an example of someone else who you observed making choices to honor the contract?
  - I've noticed that \_\_\_\_\_ has been happening a lot (name a breakdown in the expectation). Has anyone else observed this? It seems to be in conflict with these values (name specific contract values). What can we do to get back in line with our values?
  - Are there any values that need to be updated?

# SEL Feedback

Use this template to prepare for skill-building conversations with youth. It is designed to help staff present feedback to youth in an intentional way in order to facilitate positive learning and reflection about their SEL skills. This template is adapted from MHA Labs and Grant Wiggins (2012).

## Why This Matters

- It is easy to fall into the trap of giving advice rather than feedback. In contrast to advice, feedback is concrete information shared with the purpose of helping another evaluate their progress towards a goal.
- Feedback is a crucial part of SEL skill growth. Providing feedback in an accepting and non-judgmental manner helps youth understand and explore their strengths and areas of growth.
- Word choice matters in a feedback conversation. Thinking ahead of time about what to say to a young person makes the conversation more intentional and productive.

## Getting Started

- When you try this out for the first time, take the extra minutes to write out exactly what you want to say.
- Skill building conversations are great to use when things are going well and when there is room for improvement.
- The order of the template is less important than making sure that all parts are covered during the course of the conversation.

## How To Use It

- 1) After describing the context of the situation and mentioning the SEL skill expectation, the staff member should ask a question to begin a feedback conversation. The question is dependent on the situation. Some potential ideas include:
  - How did you feel when X was happening?
  - How do you feel now?
  - What would you like to try differently next time?
  - What worked well for you?
  - How did that go from your perspective?
  - Where did you learn (name SEL skill)?

## Take It Further

- Take a look at MHA's website and toolkit for more information on strengths-based storytelling. <http://mhalabs.org/>
- Share this activity with youth so they can learn to give effective feedback to others. You could even create scenarios for youth to practice.

# Template: SEL Feedback

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1) Context – what happened? What did you observe? Just facts.

*I saw/I noticed/I observed....*

2) Name the SEL Skill Expectation

*When we discussed expectations, we agreed.....*

*In the past, we have talked about....*

3) Ask a question to start a feedback conversation:



# Emoji Reflection

Use the Emoji Reflection template for regular self-reflection throughout a project. Turn this reflection template into a tool to measure individual and program-level progress over time.

## Why This Matters

- Consistent opportunities for self-reflection contribute to environments that support social and emotional learning because they help youth make meaning out of activities and experiences.
- SEL-focused reflection routines create space for youth to practice important social and emotional awareness skills.

## Getting Started

- To prepare for this activity, review the Emoji Reflection Template, front and back.
- Identify a specific context (working on a film project, participating in the leadership team meetings, during a service learning project).
- Choose an anchor statement that is a good fit for an SEL skill that you are focusing on. The Emoji Reflection Statement Examples offers some suggestions. Write your anchor statement in the shaded box at the top of the Emoji Reflection Template. For example, "While working on your film project this week, did you feel in control of your emotions?"

## How To Use It

- 1) When introducing the Emoji Reflection, discuss with youth what each emoji means and build a common understanding of the emoji scale. The emoji choices correspond to a scale (all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, a few times, not at all, wildcard), but your group can define a different scale to meet your needs. For youth who feel limited by expressing themselves in emoji, there is room to write more on the back.
- 2) Start a group discussion after completing the reflection with some of the following questions:
  - Do you ever have a hard time naming your emotions or noticing how you are feeling? Why do you think that is?
  - Have you ever experienced more than one emotion at a time? How do you think we should record something like that in this reflection tool?
  - How do you feel about choosing an emoji instead of a word to describe your feelings? In what ways is that easier or harder for you?
  - Do you think other people in this group would be able to correctly identify which emoji you will choose by the end of today? Why or why not?

## Take It Further

- Help youth interpret and reflect on their emotions:
  - Have youth look at their Emoji Reflection responses, and ask if they see any trends:
    - Were your emotions impacted by the people around you or by what we were doing that day?
    - Did how you felt impact what you or your group were able to accomplish on a given day?
- Translate this tool into data that can fuel immediate program feedback. See the [Using Data for Improvement](#) section for more ideas on how to use this tool for measurement.

# Template: Emoji Reflection

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Choose an anchor statement from the Emoji Reflection Statement Bank and write it here:

WEEK						
1						<input type="text"/>
2						<input type="text"/>
3						<input type="text"/>
4						<input type="text"/>
5						<input type="text"/>
6						<input type="text"/>
7						<input type="text"/>
8						<input type="text"/>
9						<input type="text"/>
10						<input type="text"/>

# Template: Emoji Reflection

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Emojis are only part of the story. If you have more to add, write it here:

Week 1

Week 2

Week 3

Week 4

Week 5

Week 6

Week 7

Week 8

Week 9

Week 10:

## Examples: Emoji Reflection Statements

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### Ways I Am

- I think that my project will turn out well.\*
- I made an important contribution to the project.
- The skills I learned will help me succeed in other areas of my life.

### Ways of Feeling

- This is how I felt about my work.\*
- I was in control of my emotions.\*
- I was aware of my emotions.\*
- If I felt stressed, I made myself think about the situation in a way that helped me stay calm.\*\*

### Ways of Relating

- I was able to speak about my personal problems to others\*.
- I showed respect to my teammates.
- I enjoyed working with my friends.\*\*\*
- I got along well with my teammates.
- I think my teammates like working with me.
- My teammates and I were able to work out our disagreements.

### Ways of Doing

- I felt motivated to work hard.
- I was able to find solutions to the problems I had\*.
- I managed my time well.
- I asked questions when I needed help.
- I asked for help when I needed it.
- I accomplished my goals.

\*Schutte, N. S., Malouff, J. M., Hall, L. E., Haggerty, D. J., Cooper, J. T., Dornheim, L., & Golden, C. J. (1998). Development and validation of a measure of emotional intelligence. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 25(2), 167-177. Retrieved February 2, 2016, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com.ezp3.lib.umn.edu/science/article/pii/S0191886998000014>

\*\*Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348-362. Retrieved February 2, 2016, from <http://psycnet.apa.org.ezp1.lib.umn.edu/journals/psp/85/2/348/>

\*\*\*Scheier, M. F., Carver, C. S., & Bridges, M. W. (1994). Distinguishing optimism from neuroticism (and trait anxiety, self-mastery, and self-esteem): A reevaluation of the Life Orientation Test. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 67(6), 1063-1078. Retrieved February 2, 2016, from <http://psycnet.apa.org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/journals/psp/67/6/1063/>

# Reflection Bank

Use these ideas to incorporate reflection into your daily program structure.

Reflection activities can be used throughout your program to create a positive social and emotional learning environment.

## Why This Matters

- Reflection activities provide an important time for youth to develop awareness of their emotions and practice expressing those emotions.
- Reflection activities allow youth to think intentionally about their learning experiences.
- Youth responses during reflection opportunities provide crucial feedback to staff about the effectiveness of program activities and insights into youths' personal development.

## Getting Started

- Pick an activity based on the amount of time you have. This is a bank to get you started. Use your own creativity to add to this bank.
- Modify questions to fit your activity or project.
- Each person has a preferred reflection style (group discussions, writing, creative expression, etc.). Be intentional about varying the types of reflection activities to help youth learn what works best for them.
- Provide lots of time for youth to think before you ask them to answer out loud for the group. Some youth need more time to process questions than others, and others will jump to an answer quickly without actually doing much reflection.
- If everyone is going to be asked to share out loud with the group, name that expectation at the beginning. Allow youth to share "popcorn" style rather than a fixed order to give everyone the time they need to prepare a response.

## How To Use It

- 1) Pick an activity or question that is relevant for your program activity, age of youth, and amount of time.
- 2) At the end of a particular activity or at the end of the day, devote time to the reflection activity or question. Practice validating youth feelings and thank participants for sharing.

## Take It Further

- Try using the same reflection activity for an extended period of time. Consider tracking how youth are doing. (See [Emoji Reflection](#) as an example.)
- Many of the reflection activities and questions could also work well as a check-in activity before program begins.
- For more ideas, visit [\*Building your program quality 20 minutes at a time\*](#) from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development.

# Tool: Reflection Bank

## If you have a couple minutes...

- **Color check-in:** Have youth pick a color that describes how they are feeling. Ask each youth to explain why they chose that color and what it represents to them.
- **One word:** Ask youth to describe how they are feeling in one word. Youth could also name one adjective to describe their day.
- **Facial Expression Chart:** Print pictures of different facial expressions (e.g., happy, bored, excited, angry). Have youth pick an expression that describes how they are feeling.
- **Group Process Reflection:** Have youth go around and share how they would finish the following sentences.
  - As a group, we are strongest when...
  - As a group, we are weakest when...

## If you have 5 to 10 minutes...

- **Roses and Thorns:** Ask youth to reflect on the highs and lows of their day. Have each youth think about the following questions: what was the high point of your day (your rose)? How did you feel at that point? What was the low point of your day (your thorn)? How did you feel at that point? Allow each youth to share their roses and thorns.
- **Weather Report:** Ask youth to relate how they feel right at the moment, using only weather words; sunny, stormy, partly cloudy, etc. Have youth share their weather word and explain why they might be feeling that way.
- **Pride, Praise, Progress:** Ask youth to think about their day and share one thing they are proud of (Pride), one thing they are working on (Progress), and one thing someone else did well (Praise).
- **String Toss:** Have youth stand in a circle. Ask a reflective question (e.g., who is someone in the group that you learned something cool about today? What is one thing you learned today?). Hold the end of the ball of string. Hand the ball to the first person to answer the question. That person holds on to the

string and then tosses the ball to the next person to answer the question. When everyone has answered, note how interconnected everyone is, that everyone's learning impacts everyone else.

- **Team Reflection:** After a group activity, reflect on the group process with the following questions: What was it like working with a team? What things are easier to do with a team? What things are harder to do with a team? At what point in the day did you feel most connected to others? At what point did you feel the most disconnected from others?

## If you have 15 minutes or more...

- **This is How it Happened:** Have youth work in small groups to create a short skit that portrays what they experienced in the preceding activity. Allow 10 to 15 minutes of planning time and 5 minutes for each group to perform.
- **Be the Leader:** In small groups, invite youth to recreate the experience they just had for a group of younger kids. Each group should identify a learning goal, a learning activity, and a plan for assessing if the participants learned about the goal. Have groups share their activity plans with the whole group. Allow 30 minutes for this. If youth are actually going to implement these plans, give them additional time to revise their plans and add lesson components like a time management plan or needed resources.
- **Individual Reflection:** Have youth spend some individual time writing down their responses to the questions below. Have each youth share at least one of their answers with the group.
  - Which one of your SEL skills helped you most today? How so?
  - What do you think is your most valuable contribution to the project?
  - What did you learn about yourself today?
  - How would describe your attitude today? How did your attitude affect how you felt?

## Tool: Reflection Bank

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- **Ways of Being Debrief:** Have youth reflect about their Ways of Being. Pick at least one question from each of the Ways of Being for youth to think about (4 questions in total). After 5-10 minutes of journaling time, have youth share one of their answers.
  - Ways of Feeling: How were you brave today?  
How did you express your feelings today?
  - Ways of Relating: How were you kind to others today? How did you get along with others today?  
How were you a good friend today?
  - Ways of Doing: How did you work hard today?  
How did you succeed today? How did you fail today?
  - Ways I Am: How did you have a positive attitude today? How did you learn about yourself today?